

Successful assignments

I discussed some of this above under curriculum, and some examples are in the syllabus for 526 and the article on teaching sexual representation. A brief example of what I aim for in assignments would be this from a graduate course on Realism. I had the students come to my apartment to shoot a short film called "Serving Suggestion." They had to bring a packaged food which had a picture of the product/meal on the container with the disclaimer "serving suggestion." We prepared the foods (and ate them after the shoot) and then each was recorded with a slow pan over from the advertised presentation to the actual product. The blueberry blintzes were especially memorable, looking like a plate of tumors. The exercise was fun and also gave us all a chance to compare and contrast mediated image with consumable reality as well as to reflect on Bazin's argument for the privileged realism of the sequence shot.

My film theory courses have always included close analysis of scenes as a way of having students first see how complex moving images and sound films and tapes are, and how they raise questions for analysis. Then, the tools of semiotics, close textual analysis, visual studies, psychoanalysis, feminism, and so forth can be seen as possible ways of investigating. I often describe film theory as a "desperate attempt to catch up with film practice." This not only validates the MFAs in the class, but also encourages, by the end of the course, seeing theory as a practice that should be useful, and which can be tested, rather than just taken as a set of ex cathedra truths or dictums. One such close analysis of the MGM musical *Lady Be Good* resulted in an SCMS panel on the film and subsequent publication of articles in JUMP CUT by Jane Gaines, Scott Brewer, and myself. (available online at www.ejumpcut.org, issue 31, 1986).

In the undergrad intro classes an always successful assignment which was adapted to still photography, video, super 8mm, websites, and computer graphics was to describe yourself without presenting an image of yourself. In one memorable project, an undergrad created a web site that featured all of her ex-boyfriends with a detailed (comic) list of their faults and why she broke up with them. Portraits of others and autobiographical/diary projects have also worked well. In the Media Literacy course groups that ran throughout the course produced final projects fusing critical analysis and audio-visual presentation such as a detailed analysis of the Disney animation narrative formula. A similar assignment in my recent Hong Kong cinema course created groups fusing RTF majors with Asian Studies students to study the cultural basis for film genres, each group contributing their expertise to the final reports.

For graduate courses on cultural analysis, I devised an exercise in which certain classes are designated as "fashion statement" days and students have to do a catwalk and explain the cultural meaning of their apparel. The first time is pretty mundane, but by the end some folks use it to act out and act up: club clothes, a Ringling Bros. clown, an EMS medic, cross-dressing, sexy lingerie, full Goth tattoos, sari and bangles, etc. have all appeared. In any case, it trains people in learning to read cultural clues that are otherwise, taken-for-granted, that is ideological. For a course highlighting cultural consumption, ethnographic location visits included Chinatown, Petco (pet supply store), Megamall (Latin American stalls), tattoo parlor, etc. as a way of understanding how cultural differences shape different consumption patterns. Various syllabi posted on my personal web site.

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/gatewaypages/kleinhansfolder/kleinhans.html>